

The First Phase of De-Stalinization in East-Central Europe (1953–1958)¹ **A comparative approach**

De-Stalinization was a particularly significant process during the era following Stalin's death. It impacted and changed just about every aspect of life. The methods used to put political policy into practice, the priorities of economic and social policies and of cultural life, together with the relationship between the ruling forces and the public all underwent changes. The goal continued to be the building of socialism and, in the final analysis, of communism, albeit, not a single party including the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) had given any precise definition of these concepts, or, most importantly, what it would take for these goals to be reached. They held onto the Marxian definition as redefined by Stalin, that socialism was a condition under which the principle of "each according to his ability, each according to his work" would be valid. This meant that there would be no coercion to work but that the demands of the individual could not yet be satisfied. This tenet was stated in the 1936 Stalin constitution.² The structure of communism, for which Marx's original definition: "each according to his ability, each according to his needs," was accepted, was envisioned for sometime in the distant future.³ This Stalinist "definition of socialism" – which Marx never used – became a tent of the East European countries after 1947. However, the decades old question that remained unanswered, even in the post-Stalin world was: how does one get to "socialism," and, will "socialism" be the same for every country?

The main characteristics of the Stalinism, in part imported into the region after 1947, and in part coming from within were: the practice of forced industrialization (particularly with regard to manufacture of the means of production), and the transformation of agriculture on the basis of the logic of the class struggle. This latter did not mean increasing output or modernization but the liquidation of certain social classes (large estate owners, rich landed farmers), and the introduction of one-person government based on the personality cult

¹ This study was prepared within the framework of the OTKA PD [National Science Research Program, Postdoctoral Research Fellowship] 105866 research, and is a portion of a longer monograph. In this particular study, East-Central Europe means Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. There are a number of resources available for defining concepts used in conjunction with the region. István Bibó more or less called the sub-region Eastern Europe, Jenő Szűcs called it 'Central and Eastern Europe', Oskar Halecki called in 'East-Central Europe', while Emil Niederhauser called it 'Western Eastern Europe'. While true that after 1949 East Germany was generally considered part of the region, I am ignoring it for the purpose of this study because of its unique position and involvement. In addition, the Baltic states, western Belarus and western Ukraine are also often included here, but during the period in question these regions were part of the USSR. Therefore, I have not included them in this study. See: In: Bibó István összegyűjtött munkái. Eds.: Kemény István – Sárközi Mátyás. Vol I. Bern, 1981, 202–251.; Jenő Szűcs, "The Three Historical Regions of Europe. An Outline". *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 29 (1983), 131-184.. Oscar Halecki: *The Millennium of Europe*. University of Notre Dame, 1963.; Niederhauser, Emil: *A kelet-európai fejlődés egysége és különbsége*. *Magyar Tudomány*, 1988. nr. 9. 668–681.

² Stalin first put forward this tenet in an interview in December 1931. See: J. V. Stalin talks with the German author Emil Ludwig, December 13, 1931. Marxist Internet Archive (download: 2013.09.09.).

³ From the practical point of view, Stalin only defined the nature of socialism as the advanced system in the USSR in 1952. At the same time, he shifted the validity of the theoretical analyses of Marx, Engels, and Lenin into the far distant future and defined socialism as a social formation of its own. J.V. Stalin: *Economic problems of socialism in the USSR*. Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1972.

combined with unbridled terror. That was the Soviet form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Another Stalin legacy was the huge empire created by the Stalinization of the East European countries, in which the leading role of the USSR was incontestable. In this camp every single country was strictly dependent on Moscow and trusted in Moscow. All were subordinate to the camp center and horizontal relations with one another were either non-existent or formal.⁴

De-Stalinization resulted in two decisive changes. They were closely connected; nevertheless they were contradictory to a certain degree. One aspect of de-Stalinization affected the domestic policies of several of the socialist countries. The process got underway in 1953 but it was 1955-1956 before the Soviet leadership officially announced the doctrine that every country had the right to set its own course on the way to socialism.⁵ This was also an admission that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and adherence to the Soviet model had not brought the East European countries any closer to “socialism,” but quite the contrary, had brought about declines from what had been their previous development levels. This meant taking a step backwards and re-thinking how the goal could be otherwise achieved. The other outcome of de-Stalinization was that “with the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) (in 1956), the officially confirmed the policy of “peaceful coexistence” was given new content. In essence, Khrushchev took the 1924 Stalin tenet, that socialism must be built in a single country because the flames of revolution had died out in Europe, and applied it to the whole socialist camp. In other words, he admitted that the socialist camp would not be expanding within the foreseeable future and was forced to accept the existence of two camps. From this point on, the primary goal of the Soviet Union was to get its own system of alliance, the Warsaw Pact, recognized as equal to NATO. To put it another way, it was pushing the capitalist world to recognize the existence and the right to exist of the socialist one.⁶ They justified the correctness of “peaceful coexistence” – as opposed to the previous war psychosis – with their belief in the superiority of socialism. Sooner or later the forces of socialism will be victorious over capitalism in peaceful competition and therefore no new world war was needed.

However, attainment of this goal required unity within the camp and for this very reason Moscow was forced to make concessions. The “rehabilitation” of Yugoslavia, meaning its recognition, once again, as a country that was building socialism, was tantamount to acknowledging that there were different roads leading to socialism. And that was the first sign of the tension between the “separate roads” and the need to sustain unity. The Yugoslav road resulted in a model that was different from the Soviet one. However, Khrushchev was definitely not about to let the other East European countries choose any model but the Soviet one. In fact, much as Stalin had done in the late 1930s, Khrushchev declared the legitimacy of the existing “Soviet System” on the grounds of necessity, stating that this was the only form able to protect socialism from the capitalist world. That doctrine was a real snag in the

⁴ For more on this see: Volokitina, T. V., Murashko, G. P., Noskova, A. F. and Pokivaylova, T. A.: Moskva i Vostochnaya Yevropa: Stanovleniye politicheskikh rezhimov sovetetskogo tipa (1949-1953). Ocherki istorii. Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2002, 686.

⁵ The 1955 meeting between Khrushchev and Tito was the watershed, but essentially, the appointment of Imre Nagy as Hungary's prime minister in 1953 was the de facto acknowledgement of a new political phase. It signaled that the Kremlin was no longer demanding exact adherence to the Soviet model.

⁶ The most glaring example of this was its effort to achieve the recognition of East German sovereignty and Poland's western border, an effort that all members of the socialist camp participated in.

works, preventing the separate ways from evolving at the outset, or more precisely, allowing them some latitude but not enough to try out a different model.

In addition, allowing socialism to be built on a road paved with national specifics ran the hazard of ending up with an outcome differing from the “Soviet model,” which meant that the country might want an independent foreign policy. To make things worse, if a significant portion of that autonomous foreign policy was the outcome of domestic policy, it would mean that different domestic policy roads begat different foreign policies which might then violate the interests of other countries in the camp. So, the question was reduced to the extent to which the countries of the region influenced one another, meaning to what degree did they get in the way of or perhaps assist another country in achieving its goal. Might we then speak of a close alliance or of separatist movements? To make a long story short, de-Stalinization had a significant effect on relationships within the Stalinist empire.

De-Stalinization raised the issue of both means and end: What kind of socialism might be implemented on what road, and what tactic would lead to what outcome? There were already two models: the Soviet and the Yugoslav. Which would the other countries follow and how? On ideological level the question was formulated as whether the “Soviet system” was the only way to achieve socialism, or were different frameworks also feasible?

Seeking “national roads:” the “new phase” policy (1953-1955)

There were any number of factors, external and internal, that suggested the possibility of recognizing different roads leading to socialism based on national specifics, and pulling away from the “Stalinist method.” The most attractive of these offered the chance to abandon policies that gave priority to forced industrialization and conducted an undifferentiated rural class struggle, and which made it possible to renounce overt terrorism. Factors indicating that terror was indeed declining included a Soviet amnesty decree (March 27, 1953), a halt to a Soviet purge of doctors (April 4, 1953), the arrest of Soviet interior minister Lavrentiy Beria (June 27, 1953) selection of Nikita Khrushchev as CPSU first secretary, and the start of the rehabilitation process. A front page article in *Pravda* (May 24, 1953) on “the current international situation” suggested that economic policy priorities were being revisited. “No matter how different the social systems of the different countries may be, the interests of the peoples of these countries coincide on numerous vital points. These vital points include peace and the advancement of commercial, economic, and cultural cooperation among the people.” With the conclusion of the Korean War (June 27, 1953) the war psychosis also ended. That made it possible to slow down war industry, meaning heavy industry, investments and to regroup investment priorities. The latter was very necessary since the East Berlin uprising (June 17, 1953) and workers’ insurrections in Plzeň (May 30 to June 3, 1953) pointed to problems with living standards among the populace.

The internal factors of the given countries also had significant effects on the shape of the evolving de-Stalinization processes. The character and depth of Stalinism and the way it had come about were decisive. Discussions on the “roads to socialism” did not post-date Stalin’s death but began much earlier, before adopting the Soviet model and the establishment of Cominform.⁷ Therefore, the rehabilitation of the pre-1947 roads was as important – at least in

⁷ The main objective of Cominform (The Information Office of the Communist Parties) which was established on September 27, 1947, was to coordinate the political turn-about in Eastern Europe in 1948-1949, meaning the introduction of a dictatorship of the proletariat based on the Soviet model.

part – as was protection of the outcomes of the post-1947 policy. At the same time, the people representing the “national road” concept in the de-Stalinization process and their earlier relationship to Stalinism were also significant. The fact is that there are always people behind the structures and people are the ones who alter those structures.

In Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party, headed by Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský were essentially successful in implementing the “Czechoslovak road” concept.⁸ The turnabout (communist takeover) of February 1948 took place amidst the “limited democracy” that had existed between 1945 and 1948. The essence of the “Czechoslovak road” was that after an election won by the communists (1946) it executed a power takeover based on existing political mechanisms because of the splits and weaknesses in the “democratic forces,” and because it was able to take advantage of their political failings. Another specific of Czechoslovakia was that the entire shift took place independently, without the presence of Soviet troops, relying essentially on the support or passivity of the public.⁹ Following 1948 the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC) maintained the political structure it had evolved between 1945 and 1948, at least on the surface. It retained a semblance of a multi-party system (although all the Slovak parties were liquidated and the social democrats were “merged” into the communist party) but this was no longer real pluralism. The measures were intended to sustain an image of democracy towards the outside world.¹⁰

The “Czechoslovak road” to socialism assumed that in an industrially developed country with a measure of democratic tradition, it would be possible to shift to a people’s democracy through “peaceful means” and through that to socialism. This historical experience played a significant role in Czechoslovakia’s process of de-Stalinization, too. The debates in Czechoslovakia following Stalin’s death were not around the extent to which it was necessary to deviate from “the Soviet model,” or whether it would be possible to reach socialism along separate roads. The Czechoslovak debates were exactly the opposite – the Communist Party leaders argued that they had been on a separate road since the outset, following the path set by Klement Gottwald, and were very close to their objective.¹¹ For this reason, when Gottwald died just a few days after Stalin’s funeral, he could not be used as the target of critique against Stalinism. Gottwald personified the “Czechoslovak road,” and thus, the personality cult surrounding him which grew even stronger after his death, was closely linked with the essential issues of socialism in Czechoslovakia.¹²

⁸ The Czechoslovak party had been using the phrase “Czechoslovak road” since the end of the war.

⁹ While initially the CPC did not in any way promote socialism as an attainable target, it did espouse a national-democratic revolution. It was “national” in that the country expelled its German and in part, its Hungarian residents, and “democratic” in that it partially distributed the assets left behind by the Germans (and Hungarians) among members of Czech and Slovak society. It is not important whether these were tactical or serious moves. The outcome was that the policy had a major influence on Czechoslovak society. See: Abrams, Bradley F.: *The struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism*. Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 178–198.

¹⁰ Jiří Kocián: *System polityczny w Czechosłowacji w latach 1948–1989*. In: *Od transformacji do transformacji. Polska i Czechosłowacja w latach 1947(1948)–1989*. Eds.: Jan Jacek Bruski– Eduard Maur – Michał Pułaski – Jaroslav Valenta. Prague, 2001, 46–47.

¹¹ Following the 21st congress of the CPCU, in the summer of 1960, the statewide conference of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was the first in the region to declare that Czechoslovakia had “laid the foundations for socialism.” See: *Csehszlovákia Kommunista Pártjának országos konferenciája. 1960. július 5. – július 7. Bratislava, Pravda Kiadó, 1960.*

¹² It is worth noting that professionals in the field are wrong in categorizing the Rudolf Slánský trial as the Czechoslovak “Tito trial”. Slánský was not on trial for representing the “national road,” but the very opposite.

At the same time, Gottwald's death brought about a leadership crisis in Czechoslovakia. Gottwald had been both president of Czechoslovakia and president (předseda) of the party. As president of the country, he was succeeded by Antonín Zápotocký, but there was no one in the party with anything like Gottwald's prestige, so they simply eliminated the position of party president. It took until September 1953 before the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia officially elected Antonín Novotný as the party's first secretary.¹³ In other words, power was divided, for in Czechoslovakia the head of state was a traditionally powerful position. Even though its authorities had been chipped away by the constitution of 1948, it remained highly significant in the eyes of the public.

The leadership crisis was compounded by economic difficulties. Exaggerated industrialization and huge investments for arms production meant that the public and in particular the blue-collar workers, had significant cash reserves while neglect of agriculture meant that the amount of available consumer goods was far less than demand. Therefore, a plenary session of the National Assembly, meeting on May 30, 1953, adopted a monetary reform and the termination of ration coupons for food and manufactured goods. The crown was shifted to a gold standard and the old currency was replaced with new bills. The monetary exchange from old to new was pocket-gouging for the public, but that was the purpose of the move. The government wanted to reduce the cash reserves of the populace. The unfavorable exchange rate triggered social dissatisfaction and the blue-collar workers went out on strike. The most significant protest was organized by the workers at the Skoda factory in Plzen. Official forces used singular brutality to break it. But a lesson was learned. In early August, speaking at a barrage construction site in Klíčava, near Kladno, Zápotocký condemned forceful collectivization and promised farmers that they would be allowed to leave the collective farms. At the same time, the party's Central Committee met and passed a resolution to allow intra-party democracy, to end purges, to restore the role of the bodies of popular representation and to reduce the forced rate of industrialization. Responding to pressure from Moscow, they adopted the "*August thesis's*" which were the first time they spoke of the serious economic mistakes they had made. However, they did not make the theorems public.¹⁴ A month later, a new Central Committee meeting proclaimed a "*new phase*," which promised to cut the industrialization rate, maintain party democracy and re-visit show-trial convictions.

The "new phase" policies were interrupted by secret Czechoslovak-Soviet negotiations in Moscow in April 1954. Khrushchev criticized Zápotocký even though he thought the latter was right on agricultural issues. Eventually, Novotný was able to overcome Khrushchev's objections. But Zápotocký's position weakened and Novotný's grew stronger¹⁵ amidst a

This trial had sharply Czech nationalist and anti-Semitic overtones as the main charge against Slánský was his internationalism and for that reason, the fact that he was Jewish was "naturally" emphasized. It also deserves mention that for a long time Gottwald opposed Slánský's arrest and Stalin had to push very hard to make the trial go forward. See: Igor Lukes: Rudolf Slánský: His Trials and Trial. Washington, Cold War International History Project – Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Working Paper 50).

¹³ Jiří Pernes: Kryzys režimu komunistycznego w Czechosłowacji. In: Od transformacji do transformacji... op.cit. 84.

¹⁴ For more details, see: Jiří Pernes: Krize komunistického režimu v Československu v 50. letech 20. století. Brno, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2008, 96–104.

¹⁵ Novotný spectacularly consolidated his power at the 10th congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia CPC held on June 11-14, 1954, which Khrushchev attended. However, the congress resolution retained components of the "new phase," which declared that agricultural output and manufacturing to meet public needs had to be increased. At the same time, it concluded that with fulfillment of the first five-year plan

slowdown in the “new phase” policies. The end to this early phase of Czechoslovak de-Stalinization was signaled on February 11, 1955, in an address Novotný presented to a plenary session of the Central Committee and when a resolution was adopted to accelerate and complete the collectivization of agriculture. Granted, the political line was not a return to the Stalinist concept which treated collectivization exclusively as a class-struggle issue. However, it did state that one reason for the slowdown in collectivization was “underestimation of the class struggle in the villages” which had led to insufficient measures against the wealthy farmers (kulaks). At the same time, it pointed to the importance of agricultural modernization and improving the productivity level. It stated that collectivization would require advances in mechanization, construction of common barns and stables as well as other outbuildings, and political and professional advances in agricultural leaders.¹⁶

Hungary was the place where, a few months after Stalin’s death, the most spectacular de-Stalinization measure was taken. Ironically, Stalinist methods were used to bring it about, for it involved direct Soviet intervention, but it put Imre Nagy into the prime ministership. Earlier Nagy had been severely criticized and stripped of his leadership position precisely because of his “separate roads” policies.¹⁷ A Hungarian party and government delegation held talks in Moscow on June 13-16, 1953, where the Soviet leadership harshly criticized Rákosi for exaggerated industrialization, over-building the armed forces, coerced agricultural collectivization, supply problems, a decline in living standards, and the personality cult. The Moscow critique was followed by the changes. A meeting of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Working People’s Party (HWPP) on June 27-28 exposed “the mistakes made while building socialism” and the reasons behind them, and it set down new party guidelines (“the June resolutions”). The Central Committee essentially adopted Moscow’s critique, turning it into a resolution and even went so far as to declare that the economic policy guidelines adopted by the 2nd congress of the HWPP (1951) were faulty. A step (backwards) this radical had not taken place up until then in either Czechoslovakia or Poland. After the Central Committee re-visited the views of Imre Nagy on rural policy which had once been condemned (on September 3, 1949) it promised that a fundamental change would take place in economic policy, would allow the collective farms to de-collectivize and would terminate the categorization of rich farmers (kulaks) as enemies.¹⁸ However, the direct Soviet intervention yielded ambiguous results. It established a dual management system leaving Rákosi, who had been responsible for the faulty policy up till then, at the head of the party while reinforcing the role of the new Nagy government tasked in implementing the “new phase” policy. This duality had multiple pitfalls, leading to disputes over competency, and eventually to the failure of the “new phase” policy itself.

(1948-1953) a firm economic foundation for socialism had been put in place. This move was to protect the results of the era of Stalinism.

¹⁶ Resolution by the Central Committee of the CPC on the status and further development of agriculture (February 11, 1955) and Resolution by the Central Committee of the CPC on the further advance of the Uniform Farming Cooperatives, and on securing the harvest, autumn work and collection (June 29-30, 1955). See: Od X. do XI. Sjezdu. Usnesení a dokumenty ÚV KSČ. Praha, Státní Nakladatelství Politické Literatury, 1958, 68–75., 115–124.

¹⁷ For more on this see: Gyarmati György: A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerváltó fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon, 1945–1956. Budapest, ÁBTL–Rubicon, 2011, 329–343.

¹⁸ A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja határozatai, 1948–1956. Ed.: Izsák Lajos. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 1998, 188–206.

Hungary's situation was also unique in that the Hungarian communist party had not had an "own Hungarian way" concept prior to the advent of Stalinism, so there was nothing to revive after Stalin's death. In 1943 the communist party, which had been operating underground within Hungary, was dissolved, so the leadership of the communist party after 1945 acted as a complete minion to Soviet political will. One excellent example of this came in 1948 when the Kremlin changed its attitude towards Yugoslavia. The Hungarian communist party was the first to wave the Soviet party's banner even though it had maintained a good relationship with the Yugoslav communists up until then, with Tito being highly popular among the Hungarian public.¹⁹ (Poland, for instance, was quite laid back in its participation in the anti Tito campaign.) We can also qualify it as a Hungarian specific that when the first free elections were held (1945), the right-center won, with the communists and social democrats combined winning fewer seats than the Independent Smallholders' Party. Another sign of just how weak the communists were is that in the 1947 elections they only managed to win 22.25 percent of the votes. This is one reason why the Hungarian communist party did not design a "Hungarian road," for the only way it could effect a takeover was with help from the USSR. At the same time, choosing Imre Nagy – whether they knew it or not – was taking a politician who did have his own views on building socialism in Hungary, even if the ideas had not crystallized into a "separate road" concept, and placing him at the helm of government. Nagy, as opposed to Novotný, was not a simple apparatchik who had clawed his way the top, but a person with a talent for, and interest in, theoretical issues. Regarding collectivization, even before 1948-1949 he had argued adamantly that it could not be done quickly or through coercion. He did not question the final objective but did object to the Stalinist road. He was similarly attracted to the ideals of direct democracy which began to take shape spontaneously in Hungary in 1945. Although its form may not have been the same, the revival of the Patriotic People's Front in 1954, definitely pointed in this direction.²⁰ Khrushchev's intentions remain unclear, even in hindsight, but we might try to risk a few conclusions regarding the question of why Hungary was the only country that Moscow radically intervened in, in 1953. For one thing, Hungary was less significant strategically to the USSR than Czechoslovakia or Poland. (Soviet forces were still stationed in Austria at this time.) For another, the Hungarian communist leadership emulated the Stalinist model more closely and more ardently than any other country in the region, completely ignoring the country's natural endowments and the needs of the populace. Thus, since there was no hope of evolutionary development it had to intervene directly, for the events in Plzen and East Berlin were a warning. The Kremlin's goal was to maintain social stability and it was justifiably concerned about Hungary repeating the insurgencies in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. At the same time, by setting up a dual structure (party and government) Rákosi had the opportunity to pull back on the reins of government from time to time, if the country was thought to be galloping forward too freely.

Nagy's "new phase" policy came to an end in early 1955, at about the same time the Czechoslovak "new phase" policy was halted. The difference in the endings was essentially the same as the one under which they began. In Hungary the end came following direct Soviet intervention while in Czechoslovakia it was concluded as the result of an autonomous

¹⁹ Ripp Zoltán: Példaképből ellenség. A magyar kommunisták viszonya Jugoszláviához, 1947–1948. In: Fordulat évei 1947–1949. Politika – képzőművészet – építészet. Eds.: Ständeisky Éva et al. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 1998, 55–56.

²⁰ See: Rainer M. János: Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz, I. 1896–1953. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 1996.

initiative. On January 8, much the same as in June 1953, the Hungarian leadership was ordered to Moscow and Khrushchev severely criticized Nagy. Mikhail Suslov was present at the March 2-4 meeting of the Hungarian Working People's Party Central Committee to exert the USSR's will and András Hegedüs took over Imre Nagy's post. At the April 14 Central Committee meeting the Stalinist forces went further than this, stripping Nagy of all his party functions. The resolution stated that Nagy's "anti-Marxist, anti-Leninist and anti-party views formed an interconnected system" and that in attaining his goals he had "applied methods foreign to the party and opposed to the party that were even divisive."²¹ I should add that this last move was done by Rákosi on his own and not in response to any Soviet initiative.

But the overall Soviet intervention was unable to halt the social flows, for almost simultaneously with Nagy's ouster came the formation of the Petőfi Circle of the Union of Working Youth which quickly became the voice of the reformers. Khrushchev meanwhile was unable to be consistent. He did not connect the dots, did not see the relationship between events in the different countries, and did not see how they would affect the leaderships of other countries. Shortly after Rákosi regained his dominant position, Khrushchev travelled to Yugoslavia to reconcile with Tito. Termed the "Walk to Canossa" by insiders, the CPSU recognized every country's right to choose its own road to socialism. That instantly limited Rákosi's own maneuverability and Nagy, feeling himself justified, not only failed to exercise the requisite self-criticism but increasingly analyzed his "new phase" policy including its shortcomings and the tasks still to be completed. Nagy's theoretical writings of 1955 and 1956 criticized Stalinism with increasingly severity.²²

Poland had no need of Soviet intervention as radical as the Hungarian version. The reasons lay in the specifics of "Polish Stalinism," and in what led up to it. Poland – as opposed to the other countries of the region – did not experience peace at the end of World War II with peace but underwent a period of civil war or partisan warfare. The fighting went on there from 1944 to 1949. It is estimated that during this time the courts issued verdicts in 55,000 political cases, and about 10,000 of these were sentences of capital punishment. In addition to that the fighting claimed somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 lives. To compound the situation, in 1944-1945 no fewer than 40,000 members of the Polish Home Army were interned in the Soviet Union.²³ With this in the background,²⁴ when the turnabout came in 1948, the Stalinization of the Polish state and economy meant that years of peace had finally come to a country where the populace was exhausted by the fighting and the constant fear for their lives. In other words, Stalinism (1948-1954) in Poland did not cause the social upheaval that it did in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. And then of course, the fact that the Polish leaders "sabotaged" implementation of a total Soviet-type dictatorship every

²¹ A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja határozatai, 1948–1956... op.cit. 34.

²² For works by Imre Nagy dating from this period See: Nagy Imre: A magyar nép védelmében." Vitairatok és beszédek 1955–1956. Paris, Magyar Füzetek, 1984.

²³ Andrzej Werblan: Stalinizm w Polsce. Warszawa, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze i Literackie, 2009, 66–67.

²⁴ We also need to point to a huge popular migration. Following expulsions and forced resettlements, millions of Polish nationals were forced to leave their homes and the people forced to move into the one-time German territories lived in permanent uncertainty, always expecting a reversal. Of the Central and East European countries, Poland lost the largest number of lives, with 6 million Poles killed in the six years of the war. See: Andrzej Paczkowski: Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939-1989. Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 103–106.

chance they got also played a role.²⁵ And one other reason: Bolesław Bierut counted as a weakling compared to Rákosi and Gottwald and Stalin did not make any particular demands on Poland. Typical of the situation was that Władysław Gomułka, the foremost advocate of a special Polish road to socialism was criticized and expelled from the party, but he was not subject a show trial although he was imprisoned. This was despite the fact that on April 5, 1948, the foreign affairs section of the CPSU wrote a study called “On the position regarding the anti-Marxist ideology of the leaders of the Polish Workers’ Party.” That study sharply criticized Gomułka’s views and through him it criticized all of Polish Marxism, alleging that it had “broken away from the teachings of Lenin and Stalin and the ideological and theoretical treasures of the Bolshevik Party.”²⁶ In particular, the Soviets criticized the theorem that evolution in Poland was possible through a people’s democracy, meaning that it would be possible to achieve socialism without requiring a dictatorship of the proletariat.²⁷ Up to this point the Polish concept was not particularly different from the Czechoslovak one. The significant difference however was in the fact that the CPC had essentially achieved that goal and then adjusted to Soviet expectations, while amidst Polish conditions the theory didn’t appear to stand much of a chance of implementation. To make things worse for Poland, Gomułka did not resort to self-criticism. Polish nationalism – much like the Hungarian version – looked to be far more dangerous than the Czechoslovak version in Moscow’s eyes, since the latter did not include anti-Sovietism.

In Poland, the first signs of the “Thaw” appeared in 1954. Censorship was gradually limited and criticism – very mild – of the operations of government bodies appeared in the media. An amnesty was announced under which some of the people imprisoned for political “crimes” were released. The collectivization process slowed. The first intellectual debate circles were formed and ideological pressure on culture (mainly on literature and films) was reduced, allowing a distancing from the dogma of socialist realism (sorealism).

At this time an unexpected event handed ammunition to the advocates of de-Stalinization. A leading functionary in the state security agency, Józef Światło, defected to the West and starting in August 1954, the Polish language broadcasts of Radio Free Europe began reporting on the excesses and crimes of the Stalinist regime.²⁸ The immediate outcome was the reorganization of the state security bodies, but far more important was the impact on Polish society, which included party members. A growing circle of protesters demanded an end to the privileges of state security agency and party functionaries, an investigation of unlawful acts and the rehabilitation of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa). Between November 29 and December 1, 1954 an extended plenary session of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) was held. Initially planned to last half a day, it went on for three entire days. In that time 35 of the 170 participants took the floor and the sharp criticism of the activists surprised even the party leadership. At Bierut’s

²⁵ In the 1980s, Teresa Torańska did some very interesting interviews with the one-time party leaders who were still alive on Stalinism in Poland. See: Teresa Torańska: “Them”: Stalin's Polish Puppets. New York, HarperCollins, 1988.

²⁶ Volokityina, T.V: A „nemzeti utak” elutasítása és a jugoszláv ügy. *Múltunk*, XLII. (1997) 3. sz. 156–157. For document see: *Sovetskii faktor v vostochnoi Evrope, 1944-1953*, t. 2, Eds.: Volokitina, T.V. et al. Moscow, 1999, 814–830.

²⁷ Andrzej Werblan: Władysław Gomułka. Sekretarz Generalny PPR. Warszawa, Książka i Wiedza, 1988, 454–475.

²⁸ Zbigniew Błażyński: Mówi Józef Światło. Za kulisami bezpieki i partii. Londyn, Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1986.

request, every speaker was asked to authorize his/her own text which the Central Committee then sent to the first secretaries of the Vojvodship party committees. The goal of the Politburo was to lower the tension created by Światło's defection.²⁹ Following the Central Committee meeting, on December 13, even Gomułka was released.

By the summer of 1955 events were clearly moving forward under the sign of the political thaw. A poem by Adam Ważyk called "*Poem for adults (Poemat dla dorosłych)*" was published in *Nowa Kultura* on August 19. The appearance of this poem by the one-time Stalinist poet was the first important event in Poland's thaw, and became the icon of literature. The poem started a nationwide debate and contributed to the success of the political thaw. At this same time, Polish youth became active. Debates began within the Union of Polish Youth (ZMP), which had been established along the lines of the Soviet Komsomol. In the autumn of 1955 the ZMP paper, *Po Prostu*, changed its profile and became the weekly for "students and young intellectuals." Later, during the events of October 1956, it became the voice of the reform.

The common features of the "new phases" are that they ran in transitional (1953-1955) periods of international détente and that none of the leaders in power in any country questioned the Stalin-type centrally planned command economies or the ownership relations in which the state was dominant. None questioned the political structure based on the monopoly of a single party. However, these were not the "new phase" objectives. The question of "the model" had not yet come up. As far as the models were concerned, there appeared to be two alternatives. One was the socialism model evolved by Stalin in the Soviet Union. Typical of this model was the bureaucratic government collectivization of private and societal property in which the basis for community existence was state mediation. This was contrasted with the "now legitimate" Yugoslav model of self-administration based on state and community ownership. At this time however, not one of the leading politicians raised the idea of implementing the latter.³⁰ Not even Imre Nagy's concept of the "new phase" contained any new strategic tasks. The goal remained "laying the economic foundations for socialism and building socialism" while "changing and correcting previous erroneous tactics." The "new phase" was not of "socialism," in other words, it was not concerned with a specific form of socialism, merely with modifications in the road leading to socialism. It was not a new model, only a choice of roads.³¹ In the language of the Marxian categories of the time: was a dictatorship of the proletariat necessary to achieve socialism or could it be attained through evolution, without requiring a dictatorship of the proletariat?³² The new tactics pointed towards the latter.

In all three countries discussed, the "new tactics" changed economic policy priorities, meaning that the proportion of industrial investments was reduced and funding for

²⁹ Werblan, op. cit. 2009, 56.

³⁰ Economics experts, however, were debating how to reform the central command economy at this time. This was particularly true of Hungary. See: Földes György: Egyszerűsítés, mechanizmus és iparirányítás 1953–1956. *Párttörténeti Közlemények*, 1984. 2. sz. 72–108.

³¹ For more, see the study by Imre Nagy: Az „új szakasz” jellemző vonásai és sajátosságai. In: „A magyar nép védelmében.” op.cit. 25–30.

³² Here we need to note that Stalin combined the transitional phase Marx assumed to exist as "a period of the dictatorship of the proletariat" originally intended as the foundation for socialism, and the socialism phase. In other words, Stalin retained the "dictatorship of the proletariat" even after the "exploiting classes" were terminated. During the period of de-Stalinization, the ideological and political debates were around this issue, that is, how should the Stalinist theorems be revised?

agriculture was increased. In all three countries the institution of the personality cult was terminated (it never reached fruition in Poland) and all moved towards collective leadership. Czechoslovakia had a dual leadership structure for several months while Hungary's lasted for nearly two years. In the former country the rivalry was between the president and party first secretary while in Hungary it was between the prime minister and the party's first secretary. Both countries had abandoned the exercise of power through the terror of the dictatorship of the proletariat and gradually terminated the open coercive class struggle against the "kulaks." Although the collectivization of agriculture remained a priority in all countries – for reasons of both principle and economics – during this period they did not force implementation. All of them declared at least partial amnesties for political prisoners and began rehabilitation.

In other words, the "new phase" was a correction in past political practices and in the final analysis – although not deliberately – it opened the way to discourses on the roads and modes of building socialism. At stake was not merely choosing the road to socialism but also creating acceptance for socialism. The question was not just how to build socialism in a given country but, with a system and power structure inherited from Stalinism, it also concerned how the given country should continue to develop while keeping one eye on serving national interests. In all three countries the greatest merit of the "new phase" was that it made it increasingly possible to deviate from the classic era of Stalinism and think, debate, and write about alternatives. Economics, philosophy, and literature were again given a voice in public affairs, and the cinematic and fine arts were allowed to shake off Zhdanov's socialist realism, allowing subjects, language and mode of expression to become pluralistic. Imbedded in this process was the debate on the model – what would socialism look like in the various countries.

From the CPSU's 20th Congress to the dispute over models (1956-1958)

In all countries the policies of the "new phase" domestic needs were the primary trigger for two factors: détente in world politics and a change in Moscow's policy towards its allies. Nonetheless, there was no connection between the "new phases" in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The party leaders did not use one another as models. Instead, the new guidelines were strongly based on what went on in the Moscow-Prague, Moscow-Warsaw, and Moscow-Budapest relationships as outcomes of major or minor Soviet interventions. The depth of the new guidelines and the implementation methods were strongly dependent on the national specifics of the systems that took shape in the given country.

The 20th Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 gave de-Stalinization a harder push. It marked a phase boundary in that it was when the CPSU took an official position on the matter at the highest party forum. Earlier bilateral talks, held in secret, now gave way to public debate in which the Soviet leadership confirmed the guideline already known as the "new phase," and the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence."³³ However, the congress also heard Khrushchev's "secret" speech, one that only the congress delegates and the new Central Committee members were allowed to hear.³⁴ Prior to their departure the communist party

³³ See: XX s'ezd KPSS: Stenograficheskii otchet. Vols. 1–2. Moscow, 1956.

³⁴ Nikita Khrushchev: On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences. In: The crimes of the Stalin era, special report to the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. New York, New Leader, 1956. CPCFor interesting studies on the secret address and its effects and on Soviet de-Stalinization, see: The Dilemmas of De-

leaders who were in power in their own countries received copies of the speech. However, shortly afterwards, the Soviet party leadership decided to allow all party and Komsomol members to find out what was in it. Khrushchev harshly attacked Stalin's person and politics, not only for the personality cult and the role he played in the terror, but also for alleged errors he made during the world war. At the same time, he was careful to defend the Soviet system, in which he always cited Lenin. His critique was exclusively focused on Stalin's crimes and he was also careful to speak only of communist victims. Khrushchev had a number of reasons that may have been behind his decision to present this list of crimes. On the domestic front, most probably he wanted this rehabilitation to hurt and disgrace those of his opponents that could be linked to Stalin (such as Malenkov), while his move may also have been preventive – better for him to make the exposure than anyone else – since this assured that he would not be accused as an accessory. Finally, he also recognized that Stalin's repression had reached such proportions that it could not be kept "secret" from society (mainly from the party apparatus). So, it had to be spoken of "openly."³⁵ Khrushchev's ultimate goal was to help the communist movement in an ideological rejuvenation, meaning to open a new page in the history of the CPSU and in its relationships with all the other communist parties. As far as the latter goal was concerned, exactly the opposite happened. The secret speech led to a serious ideological and political crisis within the socialist camp, offering a huge amount of ammunition to critics of Stalinist-type regimes. In addition, the USSR's prestige was badly shaken and Moscow's credibility suffered a major setback. The speech also had an indirect impact: the harsh criticism of Stalin's deeds offered the various other countries an opportunity to review their own experience in building socialism along Soviet lines. Closely connected to this, the speech contributed to many intellectuals having become disillusioned with Marxism-Leninism. A growing number voiced their critique of the political systems built upon these principles and many others broke with communism completely.³⁶

Criticism of Stalinism gained momentum in all socialist countries. In March, plenary sessions of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Working People's Party (HWPP) (March 12-13) and of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (March 29-30) held debates on the afterlife of the 20th Congress. Both parties' leaderships verbally recited the lessons, but really chose to wait until it blew over.³⁷ The situation in Poland was more complicated since Bolesław Bierut died while still in Moscow. In the presence of Khrushchev, who arrived in Warsaw for the funeral, Edward Ochab was chosen as the new party leader. In the meantime debate over Khrushchev's secret speech was sharp and nationwide.³⁸

Stalinization. Negotiating cultural and social change in the Khrushchev era. Ed.: Polly Jones. London–New York, Routledge, 2006.

³⁵ The huge number of people released from the camps played a tremendous role in the process of de-Stalinization. See: Stephen F. Cohen: *Rethinking the Soviet Experience. Politics and History Since 1917*. New York–Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, 96–100. Also see: Baráth Magdolna: Az SZKP XX. kongresszusa a legújabb orosz szakirodalom tükrében. *CPC. Múltunk*, (2006) nr. 2. 177–200.

³⁶ M. Iu. Prozumenshchikov: „Sekretnyi” доклад N. S. Khrushcheva na XX s’ezde KPSS i mezhdunarodnoe kommunisticheskoe dvizhenie. In: *Doklad N.S. Krushcheva o kulte lichnosti na XX s’ezde KPSS*. Ed.: K. Aimer–Makher, Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2002, 17–40.

³⁷ For Rákosi's address see: *Tartós békéért, népi demokráciáért!* 1956. március 25; For Antonín Novotný speech, see address published on April 15, 1956

³⁸ In a series of articles entitled “Pełnym głosem” (*Trybuna Ludu* – March 26, April 8) J.A. Szczepański demanded radical changes in cultural policy. *Po Prostu* carried a front page editorial demanding political

All this meant was that history had moved past the moderate policy changes of the pre-1956 “new phase.” Under the changed conditions the question appeared as whether or not to maintain and follow the principles of the Stalin brand of state socialism, Marxism-Leninism, and proletarian internationalism that up till then had been set in stone. And if the answer was “no”, then what? From the spring of 1956 public life in Czechoslovakia, but even more so in Poland and Hungary, was heated with these arguments. Then towards the end of 1956 Yugoslavia joined in, seeing itself validated. Events of 1956 and 1957 differed from earlier ones in that the center of gravity had shifted. Until then Moscow had set the tone of events and the impact of one socialist country on another had been negligible. At this time horizontal effects kicked in and in many cases influenced foreign and domestic policy flows in the region. The socialist bloc was turned into a real bloc at this time and through these debates, since Moscow was no longer the one setting the tone. Conclusions evolved through the interactions of the cross-fire within the camp.

From the aspect of the communist parties, Czechoslovakia was in the best position. There the agenda did not involve a change in leadership. After Gottwald died in 1953, Novotný took over as head of the party and in time was trusted by Khrushchev. The “new phase” policies and the country’s comparative economic advantage – the industry it inherited was advanced – allowed it to dampen public dissatisfaction after the Plzen strikes of 1953 were broken. Between 1953 and 1956 consumer prices were reduced six times, by a total of 18 percent, and many steps were taken to accelerate housing construction and raise salaries while also reinforcing the positions of Slovak national institutions and councils. Czechoslovak policy was so successful that in 1956 social dissatisfaction really was lower than in Poland or Hungary.³⁹ On October 24, 1956, when Novotný travelled to Moscow for official talks, Khrushchev set Czechoslovakia’s economic policy before the other socialist countries as an example.⁴⁰ While overall that was the situation, the 20th Congress of the CPSU did shake up Czechoslovak party and social life. Khrushchev’s secret speech shattered its peace and quiet. On March 29-30, 1956 the party’s Central Committee discussed the lessons of the congress, and the party’s leadership criticized its own past actions (self-criticism), albeit mildly. The debate continued at the next Central Committee meeting (April 19-20) with forty-four people asking for the floor. A resolution adopted then concluded that the critique had reached a level that was damaging to the party. Alexej Čepička, who had been a deputy prime minister, minister of national defense, a member of the Politburo and a secretary of the Central Committee, was stripped of all his positions. Finally, the Central Committee wrote a letter to the Writer’s Union, to be read at its forthcoming congress, calling on the writers to moderate themselves.⁴¹ By the end of March, not only were the

change. An article called “Co robić?” demanded the dissolution of the Union of Polish Youth (ZMP) and the establishment of a new one.

³⁹ It should be noted that some historians believe Czechoslovak society missed out on its chance in 1956, when it did not revolt against Stalinism. Muriel Blaive: *Promarněná příležitost. Československo a rok 1956*. Praha, Prostor, 2001. But, we need to underline that revolutions and uprisings cannot be imported, no matter what the historical situation, and the mood in Czechoslovak society was not revolutionary. We will discuss the various reasons for this later.

⁴⁰ Regarding that Moscow meeting on October 24, 1956. In: *Évkönyv I*. 1992. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 1993. 145–156. quoted Khrushchev as follows: “In itself ideological work will not help if we do not guarantee improvements in living standards. There is a reason why rioting took place in Hungary and Poland but not in Czechoslovakia. The reason is that living standards in Czechoslovakia are incomparably higher.”

⁴¹ Od X. do XI. Sjezdu. Usnesení a dokumenty ÚV KSČ. op. cit. 290–298.

writers discussing Stalin's "personality cult," but so were the unions, and various youth forums also kept it on their agendas and took the initiative in the tone of debates. Critical voices became increasingly loud within the CPC cells and a growing number of people began calling for a special party congress.⁴²

The Czechoslovak Writers' Union held its second congress on April 22-29, 1956, an event that became a milestone in the process of Czechoslovak de-Stalinization.⁴³ The writers did not put forward any overt political demands. They remained within the framework of literature, but they sharply criticized schematic socialist realism and censorship. A proposal by two young authors, the Slovak Domiik Tatarka and the Czech Milan Kundera demanded the rehabilitation of Ladislav Novomeský, who was imprisoned on charges of "bourgeois nationalism." Although the writers' union paper (*Literární Noviny*) carried the speeches, the event was not followed up by any major social action. Student May Day protests, on May 12 in Bratislava and May 19 in Prague, did not turn into anti-Stalinism demonstrations. The protests and parades were held in a light-hearted atmosphere and although several demands were made, they did not touch on the basics of the system. The student initiatives did not arouse any interest on the part of either the intellectuals of the blue-collar workers, and neither group of potential militants joined up with them.⁴⁴

Truth be told, the CPC got the upper hand with comparative ease. On June 11-15, 1956 they held the nationwide party conference many had been demanding. There, both Novotný and Zápotocký underlined the importance of the 20th Congress of the CPSU while defending the party line set down by the 10th congress of the CPC in 1954. "The facts clearly show us that those guidelines were correct and are still correct, that we do not need to change anything and that we have in fact implemented them correctly and successfully." According to Novotný, acceptance of the achievements of the 20th Congress "does not mean they are a ready-to-use set of instructions for resolving all of our problems," and that the issues related to building socialist society need to be worked out in keeping with our own circumstances. In essence this was completely in line with the long-standing policy of the CPC, the policy of the "Czechoslovak road."⁴⁵ Regarding the Slánský trial, he continued to insist that the charges rested on facts. Although the Soviet Union had not set out to review any of its own show trials, Khrushchev continued to treat the elimination of the Trotskyites and Bukharin as points in Stalin's favor. The only charges Novotný acknowledged as false were the ones leveled against the Yugoslavs, and that was in keeping with the Soviet line.

In the final analysis, despite the rapid consolidation of the Czechoslovak party Moscow believed that things had happened there and that Stalinism was out. Moscow considered the CPC's policies exemplary. The CPC visited Moscow from January 29 to 31, 1957, and that

⁴² Karel Kaplan: *Kronika komunistického Československa. Doba tání 1953–1956*. Brno, Barrister & Principal, 2005, 418.

⁴³ The congress got underway with addresses by Antonín Zápotocký and Jan Drda (writers' union chairman), but on the third day, following a proposal by Slovak writer Katarína Lazarová the congress turned into a general forum of debate. At this time František Hrubín and Jaroslav Seifert also took the floor and voiced their opposition to ideological constraints. Seifert called the writers the conscience of the nation. The congress rehabilitated František Halas who had died in 1949 and whose works had been officially condemned by the regime's chief ideologist Ladislav Štoll (a Zhdanovist cultural policy maker). See: Michal Bauer: *II. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů 22.–29.4. 1956. Aluze – Revue pro literaturu, filozofii a jiné* (2010) 3. 96–106.

⁴⁴ John P. C Matthews: *Majales: The Abortive Student Revolt In Czechoslovakia in 1956*. Washington, D.C. 1998. (Working Paper No. 24)

⁴⁵ See: *Pod zástavou socialismu*, Vol. 5. (1956) 13.

was followed by an official return visit by Bulganin and Khrushchev on July 9-16. The Czechoslovak leaders took the Soviets on a tour of the country that included Prague, Bratislava, Košice, Brno, Ostrava, Plzen, Most, Žilina, and Olomouc. This was Khrushchev's first official visit to the East European region following the storm-filled October. Communiqués issued on the two visits wrote of identical views and that the CPC guaranteed Khrushchev its full support.⁴⁶

The situation was more heated in Poland. The strikes in Poznan that evolved into workers' uprisings in June were beaten into submission by the Polish army. Ochab took a leading role in combating the workers but he was unable to halt elections.⁴⁷ Real change came in October 1956. The 7th plenary session of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) gave in to social pressure and pressure from the reformist wing of the party and chose Władysław Gomułka as party first secretary. Gomułka had been the number one advocate for a unique Polish road to socialism. The anti-Stalinist speech he gave to the meeting contained critique of Stalin's methods of exercising power, specifically of his coercive collectivization of agriculture and accelerated industrialization.⁴⁸ This address was closely related to the policy voiced by Imre Nagy when talking of the "new phase" although it was far more explicit (after all, this was after the 20th Congress!), and it offered many the hope of real change. Gomułka's speech not only raised high hopes in Poland but also acted as a catalyst among Hungarian college students and intellectuals, precisely because they saw it as related to Nagy's political line. To a certain degree, Polish and Hungarian events had been moving side by side since the 20th Congress. In both countries the intellectuals were far more reform-minded than in Czechoslovakia, demanding real reforms in politics, economics, and culture. The debates of the Petöfi Circle organized by the Union of Working Youth in Hungary, particularly those centering on economics and philosophy, were closely related to the articles and studies in the Polish media, and even to the programs organized by Warsaw's *Klub Krzywego Koła* ("Club of the Crooked Circle") that was underway in early 1956. They also resembled the attitudes of the 2nd conference of economists.⁴⁹ *Szabad Nép* carried Gomułka's harsh anti-Stalinist speech at the October plenary session in its entirety. The outcome was that the Budapest youth demanded changes similar to the Polish ones on October 23. They demanded a place in government for Imre Nagy. Nagy's personal history was not even similar to Gomułka's but there were many common features in the policies they advocated. In the days to come it was of utmost significance that Ochab had resigned as party leader and that the Polish Stalinists had not tried to prevent Gomułka's ascendance, and that they did not call on the Soviet Union to prevent the move. So, the new Polish leader took the

⁴⁶ Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky 1945–1960. Praha, Státní Nakladatelství Politické Literatury, 1960, 125–135.

⁴⁷ For more on events in Poznan and their consequences, see: Edmund Makowski: Poznański czerwiec 1956. Pierwszy bunt społeczeństwa w PRL. Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006.

⁴⁸ The democratic road is the only road. Address by Władysław Gomułka to the 8th session of the PUWP Central Committee. Published in Hungarian in *Szabad Nép*, October 23, 1956.

⁴⁹ It was held on July 7-9, 1956. Speakers included hard-hitters like Oscar Lange (topical problems on economics in Poland), Edward Lipiński (Laws of economics and the object of political economics), Bronisław Minc (Problems with the socialist theory of reproduction), Michał Kalecki (The dynamics of investments and national income in a socialist economy), and Włodzimierz Brus (The law of values and the problems of its impact on the socialist economy). They sharply criticized Stalinist economics and adopted the thesis that Marxian views were not an absolute requirement in building socialism. At the same time they underlined that the debate could not be used to speak against socialism. See: Z obrad II Zjazdu Ekonomistów Polskich. *Nowe Drogi* (1956) nr. 6. 92–101.

helm of the party with a comparatively high level of social support without his potential enemies going against him in open battle. The outcome was that Khrushchev also accepted it.⁵⁰ In contrast, Nagy came to head the government under very difficult circumstances, having to fight not only against the Stalinists (headed by Ernő Gerő) but also against the populace, who had become radicalized on the street.

The crushing of the Hungarian uprising (November 4) brought about an extremely complicated and labyrinthine political situation. The heads of all involved countries (Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and now Yugoslavia) faced the serious dilemma of where to go from here. Could de-Stalinization be continued? If so, along what road and employing what methods? The October events clearly demonstrated the limits to possible changes to all party leaders, teaching them that unless events were under satisfactory control the “cause of socialism” could be put at risk. The Hungarian uprising pointed to the painful truth that their regimes could be easily toppled (in just a few days) unless the Soviet Union came to their defense. The overall problem returned the issue of their relationship to the Soviet Union and sovereignty to the agenda. Events had also made it clear that questioning basic principles such as the dictatorship of the proletariat (the leading role of the party) and proletarian internationalism (responsibility for the existence of the whole socialist camp) were at the essence of many other issues. These included the possibility that self-administration by the workers, a decentralized economy, and a market and the like within the umbrella of socialism, could prepare the terrain for enemies of the system and in the final analysis could trigger “counter-revolution.” The vulnerability of the system and of the power controlling it provided a new framework for the fight between the Stalinists (dogmatists) and the reformers (revisionists) in these countries.

The situation was made even more complicated by the fact that Poland’s new leadership had announced a real turnabout in October. It swore to reduce dependency on the Soviet Union first of all, and to evolve a partnership of equals. Meanwhile, Yugoslavia, shortly after the defeat of the Hungarian uprising, initiated a debate with the Soviet Union. Answers were needed to both challenges while consolidating the Hungarian and Polish situations and, if possible, not allowing the unity of the socialist camp to be upset.

Gomułka insisted on sticking to the statement made by the Soviet government on October 30, 1956, in which Moscow said that “reciprocal relations could only be based on the principles of complete equality, respect for territorial integrity, government independence and sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of others.”⁵¹ Poland in return, came forward with proposals regarding both the Warsaw Pact and COMECON that would have weakened the internal cohesion of the socialist camp. The Polish aspiration, visible from the autumn of 1956, was to relax its dependency not only on the Soviet Union but on the entire socialist camp, which in perspective, threatened to undermine the unified and powerful socialist world and weaken Khrushchev’s goal of having the Warsaw Pact recognized as equal to NATO. Therefore, in November 1956 Warsaw proposed a revamping of the Warsaw Pact that, if accepted, would have limited true cooperation within the alliance to actual war. (The proposal suggested that there be no joint armed forces, that every army be

⁵⁰ Gomułka described Khrushchev’s attitude in a report to Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai on January 11-12, 1957. See: Prime Minister Zhou Enlai’s visit to Warsaw in January 1957 *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego PRL-ZSRR 1956-1970*. Londyn, Aneks, 5-12.

⁵¹ A "Jelcin-dosszié". Szovjet dokumentumok 1956-ról. Eds.: Gál Éva - Hegedűs B. András. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 1993, 65–67.

subordinated to its own staff and that there be a Military Advisory Body alongside the chiefs of staff, the former of which would include the defense ministers and chiefs of staff of every single member.)⁵²

As far as the economic integration of the socialist camp was concerned, the Poles submitted a proposal in April 1957 which hinted at an illusionary alliance. This draft would have reduced planning to issues of energy and transportation and an information exchange. They also wanted to remove coordination control from the authority of the COMECON secretariat which was under Soviet influence.⁵³

Both Polish proposals were rejected by the other members although at least they discussed the COMECON proposals. Poland's ideas were less than timely in that particular international environment, which really wanted to tighten up integration. Poland's ideas would have loosened it instead.

There was another aspect of Polish policies that would not have encouraged unity. Tito's foreign policy autonomy was the model Gomulka aspired to emulate and to this end he sought contact with Belgrade. To Warsaw it was important that aside from the Chinese, only Yugoslavia's leadership swallowed its October shakeup without comment, and which did not consider it a danger to the socialist system. Yugoslavia's party leadership and society were pleased with the October decisions of the PUWP Central Committee. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia was the only one which published a separate brochure containing the main reports and decisions of the Polish party's 8th plenary session, issuing it in 2,000 copies. Yugoslavia was also the only socialist country to assure Poland of its support in Polish-American economic negotiations.⁵⁴ Another point worth remembering is that Tito and Gomulka took similar although not identical positions on the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the Soviet military intervention. On October 29, both parties sent messages to the Hungarian party, assuring it of their support. Tito expressed a real hope that events in Hungary and Poland would be concluded with a "Yugoslav resolution." This was true even if both Tito and Gomulka accepted the necessity of the Soviet intervention because the cause of socialism was at risk.⁵⁵

They did not agree, however on what had triggered the crisis, or what was the reason for the uprising, issues that touched on the essence of the system. The Yugoslavs argued that it was not only the Rákosi-Gerő clique but also failures of the entire bureaucratic system.⁵⁶ They argued that the 20th Congress had simplified the main problems by blaming them on the personality cult. In Hungary's case, they said, it is not enough to speak of the Rákosi-Gerő combo since the entire system, weighted down by bureaucracy, was to blame. The Yugoslav leaders set their own system of worker self-administration in contrast with the Stalin-type of bureaucratic state socialism. That argument ended up turning a fight against revisionism into a new anti-Yugoslav platform. Gomulka, despite his solidarity with Tito,

⁵² See: Memorandum w sprawie Układu Warszawskiego oraz planu rozwoju Sił Zbrojnych PRL. In: Jarząbek, Wanda: PRL w politycznych strukturach Układu Warszawskiego w latach 1955–1980. Warszawa, ISP PAN, 2008, 104–109.

⁵³ Fejtl István: Válság a KGST-ben 1956–1958. *Archívnet*, nr. 12. (2012) 3.

⁵⁴ Stosunki polsko–jugosławiańskie. Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), PZPR 1354, Sygn. XI A/42. 25–26.

⁵⁵ See: Zoltán Ripp: Hungary's Part in the Soviet–Yugoslav Conflict, 1956–1958. *Contemporary European History*, 7. (1998) nr. 2. 197–225, and Az 1956-os magyarországi forradalom lengyel dokumentumai. Ed: Tischler János. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet – Winsdor 1996, 13.

⁵⁶ See Tito's address at Pula: AAN, PZPR 1354, Sygn. XI A/43. 72–95. and Kardelj's speech: AAN, PZPR 1354, Sygn. XI A/43. 157–158.

did not take Belgrade's side in the dispute over system types.⁵⁷ One reason for his silence was that in early 1957 he faced his biggest challenge to date, parliamentary elections. At stake was verifying the legitimacy of the new political leadership. His main task was to stabilize his power and to restore the regime to a degree. The worker self-governments established in the autumn of 1956 were becoming very uncomfortable for the PUWP leadership.⁵⁸

Initially, the system debate initiated by the Yugoslavs was widely supported among intellectuals in Hungary and Poland. Until early December 1956, *Népszabadság* carried all significant positions on both sides.⁵⁹ Workers' Councils were being established in both countries since October and these bodies of self-administration were a true power alternative to the parties. In Hungary they only lasted until the end of the year, but in Poland they remained standing until the end of 1958. In Hungary, however, the October events were re-evaluated. It was officially determined that the Rákosi-Gerő clique had made mistakes but Nagy and his fellows had committed treason. That short-circuited the debate on the various systems, condemned all forms of revisionism, and sealed the fates of the workers' councils. Within this framework of interpretation, the idea of questioning the leading role of the party, or pulling the country out of the socialist camp was charged with being the talking points of a liquidator policy, a concrete historical example of how revisionism led to counter-revolution. However, given the disastrous state of the Hungarian economy, the Kádár administration decided that the system of economic control and management had to be changed. A working committee was established under the leadership of István Varga, a onetime Smallholder Party economics professor, to design the new guidelines. A significant portion of the economists and related intellectuals approved of the Yugoslav model of self-administration. Eventually, Kádár gave up on the idea of economic reform, having come to agreement with the Soviets on two important issues in March 1957. One was his agreement to try Imre Nagy and accomplices as traitors. That effectively ended the issue of revisionism and of exploring the Yugoslav model. The second was that the Soviets offered a sufficient amount of economic assistance to temporarily remedy the problems of the Hungarian economy.⁶⁰

The situation was much the same in Poland, not counting the major differences that the workers' councils there were still in operation, had attained strong positions, and had the active support of the Polish intellectuals. Most of both the workers and the economist-philosopher intellectuals strongly supported the Yugoslav self-government model and would have liked to see a similar system. By April 1957 it was clear even to Gomułka that his efforts to relax the bonds of the socialist camp both regarding the Warsaw Pact and COMECON would be rejected. A major point against him was that Poland had no allies

⁵⁷ Compare with Gomułka's address on November 29, 1956. *Trybuna Ludu*, November 30, 1956.

⁵⁸ On February 26, 1957, Polish Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz issued a platform declaration after the elections which rejected the idea of completely introducing worker and enterprise self-administration. "I think it important to emphasize that the concepts aimed at eliminating central planning and giving an enterprise total freedom over managing the national wealth while making the state take the risk is not only completely opposed to the principles of socialism but also exerts a negative effect on living standards and the entire economic system." *Trybuna Ludu*, February 27, 1957.

⁵⁹ After the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP) took a position on December 5, the reporting stopped, and not even extracts of Kardelj's December 7 address were published.

⁶⁰ See: Baráth Magdolna: Magyarország és a Szovjetunió. In: Ed.: Rainer M. János. "Hatvanas évek" Magyarországon. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 2004, 37–42.

within the camp. He had been unable to normalize relations with either East Germany⁶¹ or Czechoslovakia since October of 1956.⁶²

He was unable to evolve closer relations with Hungary because of pressure from the Polish public.⁶³ The ambivalent relationship with Tito could not counterbalance good relations within the socialist camp, all the more so as Gomułka's main foreign policy priority was to get the western border of his country recognized. The country best able to guarantee that this would come about was the Soviet Union, not Yugoslavia. Aside from his realistic concern that he could become isolated within the camp, Gomułka was pushed to condemn revisionism by the mistrust a significant portion of the PUWP members had for the new leadership, even though Gomułka had not initiated a witch hunt against the one-time Stalinists.⁶⁴

Hit by any number of external and internal forces, Gomułka finally gave in and at the 9th plenary session of the PUWP Central Committee (May 15-18, 1957) he sharply criticized the intellectuals and journalists who were demanding "a second phase of October reforms." He lambasted dogmatism inside the party but said it was less dangerous than revisionism, charging that the latter undermined the leading role and unity of the party.⁶⁵ That meeting put an end to "October hopes." Much as Kádár had done, Gomułka also abandoned the idea of a Polish model of economic management even though a committee headed by the pro-Yugoslav professor of economics Czesław Bobrowski had already submitted a proposal. It was a sign of the change in political flows that neither *Trybuna Ludu*, the Central

⁶¹ From the very beginning, the relationship between Poland and East Germany was toxic, given the memories the Poles carried of their World War II experiences. Society did not distinguish between East German and West German, and looked on both with antipathy. In addition, the communist leadership of East Germany, while recognizing the Oder-Neisse line (Treaty of Zgorzelec), tolerated and often supported revisionist attitudes among residents. Since the party leaders had taken over the country with a significant popularity deficit, they tried to hint at the possibility of regaining the lost eastern territory to boost their popularity among the public. In February 1957 Walter Ulbricht literally extorted the Polish leadership, stating that if Poland did not supply them with as much coal as they wanted, he would officially raise the border issue. For more, see: Robert Skobelski: *Polityka PRL wobec państw socjalistycznych w latach 1956–1970. Współpraca – napięcia – konflikty*. Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010, 46–56., 339–422., and Sheldon Anderson: *Cold War in the Soviet Bloc. Polish–East German Relations, 1945–1962*. Colorado, Westview, 2001.

⁶² Czechoslovakia's leadership mistrusted the Polish October turnabout for a number of reasons. On the one hand, Poland changed its economic policy, which led to a significant drop in coal shipments, causing major heating problems for Prague. They were forced to use their own high quality coal for heating, which meant that they were unable to supply East German metallurgy with the amount it needed. On the other, the person of Gomułka was a problem, since the Czechoslovak leadership had attacked him viciously earlier. Another conflictive issue was the presence of a Polish minority in Czechoslovakia and an awareness on the part of the Czechs that Poland had participated in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938. See: Jan Adamec: *Between Socialist Friendship and National Indifference: The Czechoslovak Communist Elite and its Perception of Poland and Hungary in 1956–1957*. Budapest, CEU, 2004.

⁶³ Kádár, as Hungary's leader, regularly invited Gomułka to Budapest in an effort to cool Hungarian society's support for the Poles. For more on this see: Tischler János: *Magyar–lengyel kapcsolatok a korai Kádár-korszakban, 1958 nyaráig*. In: *Évkönyv IV*. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 1995. 61–93.

⁶⁴ It should suffice to mention that only 10 new members joined the Central Committee at the 7th and 8th plenary sessions, four of whom had been alternate members. The four completely new members were Gomułka, Loga-Sowiński, Kliszko and Spychalski. See: Benon Dymek: *Z dziejów PZPR w latach 1956–1970*. Warszawa, IHRR, 1987.

⁶⁵ For the complete proceedings of the plenary session, see: AAN, PZPR 1354, Sygn.: 237/II-19.

Committee's daily, nor *Nowe Drogi*, the party's theoretical monthly published the proposal, allowing it only into print in a Warsaw paper read by a very limited group of readers.⁶⁶

Yugoslavia criticized Gomułka's turnabout. Poland's leaders nonetheless wanted to maintain its good relationship with Belgrade, although chances were dim. On September 16, 1957, Gomułka and Tito issued a joint statement on "various roads leading to socialism," albeit, Warsaw no longer mentioned any "separate road." Prior to the October Central Committee plenary session it banned *Po Prostu*, which had counted as the voice of the revisionists. Then the plenary session passed a resolution on re-examining party membership, the result of which was that the PUWP rid itself of nearly 300,000 members.

On the whole, Kádár's evaluation of events in Poland was accurate. He first met with Gomułka at a meeting in Moscow in November 1957. Kádár reported the meeting as follows: "Gomułka himself would like to strengthen the positions of socialism. However, his tactics in this effort are almost the opposite of what we are doing....Most likely, given time, say one or two years, our positions will be quite similar to one another, or at least that is what the course of development looks like it will be."⁶⁷

In post-1956 Czechoslovakia, the CPC leadership focused comfortably on fighting revisionism. For one thing, it had no serious problem with the workers' councils since after 1945 the CPC had built up very powerful positions within the trade unions. Loyal unions played a significant role in mobilizing the populace for the communist party, including the period of the takeover in February 1948. At the same time, the Czechoslovak leaders viewed Poland as chauvinist and anti-Czech and also as ideologically deviant. Their position on Hungary was similar although the negative stereotypes regarding the Hungarians were particularly strong among the Slovaks. During the time of the Hungarian uprising in October, Slovak society was strongly concerned – and the propaganda machine played on these feelings to the utmost – that a neutral Hungary would be a threat to Czechoslovakia.⁶⁸ So, it was to be expected that the CPC leadership in both Prague and Bratislava were very much against the Polish and Hungarian changes from the outset. On the day immediately following the start of the Hungarian uprising they mobilized their own internal forces and on October 25 they had already decided to militarily reinforce their entire border with Hungary.⁶⁹ A media campaign opposing the uprising also got underway. There was no doubt that the heads of the CPC were ready to support the Kádár government established after the uprising was crushed. The Czechoslovak leadership, which had treated the revolt as a counter-revolution from the outset, had no problem connecting revisionism and counter-revolution and condemning it. One reason this was so easy for them was because there were no domestic forces pressuring them to act any differently. The philosophical flow of revisionism never appeared in Czechoslovakia with the force found in Poland or Hungary.⁷⁰ It also lacked the

⁶⁶ Tezy Rady Ekonomicznej w sprawie niektórych kierunków zmian modelu gospodarczego polski. *Życie Gospodarcze*, July 2, 1957.

⁶⁷ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Országos Levéltár, M-KS 288.f. 4./14.ő.e. 7–12.

⁶⁸ See: Adamec. op.cit. 7–8.

⁶⁹ For more on this, see: Juraj Marušiak: Az 1956-os magyar forradalom és Szlovákia. *Múltunk*, LII. (2007) nr. 1. 58–103.; Oldřich Tůma: A magyar forradalom hatása Csehszlovákiára, 1956–1968. In: Az 1956-os forradalom visszhangja a szovjet tömb országában. Ed.: Rainer M. János. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 2006, 80–90.

⁷⁰ For a comparative analysis of philosophical revisionism in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, see: Michal Kopeček: Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce. Zrod a počátky marxistického revizionismu ve střední Evropě 1953–1960. Praha, Argo, 2009, 338.

economist-intellectuals able to seriously review the existing system.⁷¹ In other words, the legacy of Stalinism made it possible for the CPC to participate in the fight against revisionism without any risk to itself. Thus, Prague was the first to voice its agreement in principle with the December 1956 resolutions of the new Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP) and it did so without reservations.⁷²

Initially, the CPC responded to the system debate initiated by Yugoslavia with discreet criticism,⁷³ but then it sharply attacked it. After the 7th Congress of the Yugoslav communist party (the League of Communists of Yugoslavia – LCY),⁷⁴ the editorials in *Rudé Pravo* were much sharper in tone. They wrote: “There is only one Marxism-Leninism. Scientific socialism would not be internationally valid if it were distorted through the arbitrary and spontaneous addition of nationally determined factors.”⁷⁵ While Moscow was pleased with this position, neither the Hungarian nor the Polish party voiced anything so specific. Poland’s *Trybuna Ludu* specifically avoided any evaluation of the domestic policy aspects of the Yugoslav party’s platform. “We limit ourselves exclusively to matters of an international nature since we believe that the Yugoslav communists have the greatest authority insofar as Yugoslavia’s domestic issues are concerned,” it wrote. In complete opposition to the evaluation in *Rudé Pravo*, *Trybuna Ludu*’s editors wrote: “The Yugoslav communists have emphasized that every country had to build socialism in accordance with the specific conditions in their own country. This is correct.”⁷⁶ *Népszabadság* carried the position of the HSWP in its May 21, 1958 issue.⁷⁷ The significance of this article grew when *Pravda* republished the entire article. The Hungarian paper criticized the LCY for failing to coordinate with the other parties, for not listening to “comradely critique,” and for adopting a platform containing numerous “anti-Marxist elements” and errors. It also unequivocally rejected Yugoslavia’s critique of the socialist camp (particularly the claims regarding it being made up of “bureaucratic statist countries,” and those regarding sovereignty). But it did not qualify the entire LCY platform as being revisionist as, for instance, the Chinese had done, limiting that term to specific parts, particularly the internationally oriented ones. It is important that the article called Yugoslavia a country that is part of the socialist world system, and while it was not a part of the socialist camp there could be no doubt that it was building socialism. “The LCY is the party leading the building of socialism in Yugoslavia, even though it was making mistakes.” This statement recognized the “separate roads,” albeit it, indirectly.

⁷¹ One reason for this was undoubtedly that a “trial of economists” held on August 6-7, 1954, sentenced highly recognized economists (Josef Goldmann, František Kolár, Jaroslav Jíčínský, Jaroslav Bárta, Ivan Holý, Rudinger, Lewinter, Josef Smrkovský, Jiří Kárný, František Fabinger) to long prison terms, which silenced the entire profession.

⁷² Od X. do XI. Sjezdu. Usnesení a dokumenty ÚV KSČ. op.cit. 475–482.

⁷³ On January 4, 1957, *Rudé Pravo* published an editorial by deputy editor-in-chief Oldřich Švestka called “What have we seen in Yugoslavia?” that called attention to the disadvantages of operating an economy under the guidance of workers’ councils. The article underlined that the Yugoslav model had come about under vastly different circumstances than those in Czechoslovakia, while from the economics point of view it criticized the broad-scale spontaneous operations of the law of value, which, it wrote, had unfavorable consequences for the populace.

⁷⁴ The congress was held in Ljubljana, on April 22-26, 1958. For the platform adopted see [In Hungarian]: The LCY platform. Novi Sad, Forum 1958.

⁷⁵ *Rudé Pravo*, May 8, 1958.

⁷⁶ *Trybuna Ludu*, May 14, 1958.

⁷⁷ *Népszabadság*, May 21, 1958, 3-5, *Pravda*, 1958.

The forerunners to this duality were visible as early as June 1957 when a coup against Khrushchev was organized but failed. The expulsion of the conservatives (Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich, Bulganin, Voroshilov and Shepilov) from the Politburo was a sign that de-Stalinization was underway in practice and was halted only on the ideological plane – since it affected the “model dispute.” That was behind the failure of the system dispute initiated by the Yugoslavs. The Soviet model of socialism became the one designated for the East European socialist countries to follow although they no longer had to copy the Soviet examples in implementation. This was officially stated at a Moscow meeting of communist and workers’ parties in November 1957. There they re-confirmed the principles of “complete equality, territorial integrity, national independence and respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of others,” and at the same time concluded that there always were objective features in the building of socialism that “must unquestionably be considered,” as well as “specifics and national traditions,” and historically evolved differences.⁷⁸ The “objective features” in the declaration reflected the essence of the Soviet model, but the document clearly allowed the use of forms that differed from the Soviet dictatorship of the proletariat while prohibiting “the mechanical copying of the politics and tactics of the communist parties of other countries.” This could be interpreted as a ban on copying either the Soviet or the Yugoslav models but it was really directed towards Yugoslavia. That was strongly suggested by declaring deviation from the “basic principles of general Marxism-Leninism” to be a serious error, and citing revisionism as the main hazard.

The reformist-revisionist camp in Poland was quite enthusiastic since the October changes offered temporary hopes that the new policies would be introduced. But it was clear that the debate generated by the Yugoslavs had the opposite effect. In the final analysis, it even forced Gomułka into the anti-reform camp. The system debate was shelved and after 1958 the groups that critiqued the model of state socialism were, in effect, marginalized or become opposition. In the more fortunate cases their representatives were allowed to continue their careers as university instructors or in research institutes. Revisionism was no longer considered an internal affair that could be argued between the party and its opposition.

Following a temporary “freeze” the debate was “warmed up” again in all three countries in the early 1960s, but that is another story. The major achievement of the first wave of de-Stalinization was that it became possible to build socialism without the Soviet form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, while the major loss was that the debate on systems failed.

⁷⁸ For the declaration see: Documents of the international communist and workers movement, 1945-1976 [In Hungarian] Budapest, Kossuth. 1977. 19-30.